

Press Conference by Secretary Of Defense James N. Mattis at the NATO Defense Ministerial

Brussels, Belgium, Secretary June 8, 2018

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JAMES N. MATTIS: As you know, we have just concluded our NATO Defense Ministerial, where I'm very confident that we have delivered progress on key alliance deliverables for our Heads of State Summit that goes next month here in Brussels.

This outcome will ensure the alliance is fit to fight, I believe. The outcome being what we delivered here and the discussions we had here. And thus, we'll be better able to deter those who would attack our democracies whether with terrorism, conventional or hybrid methods.

Threats to our collective security have not waned, whether terrorism to the south or Russia's aggression and hybrid threats to the east. In response, we have discussed everything from burden sharing -- an area where the alliance has made significant progress during the last year, I must note -- to various other issues on our agenda.

On the burden sharing, in 2014, it was a watershed year in NATO, when only three nations' military spending was at 2 percent of GDP, and generally we were on downward trends with our -- our defense allocations in the democracies.

By 2017, all nations had reversed the downward trend. 100 percent had reversed the downward trend by last year in defense spending, and last year we also saw the largest across-NATO increase in military spending in a quarter century.

Now in 2018, eight nations are already meeting the 2 percent pledge benchmark, and I salute the 15 allies who are on track to reach 2 percent by 2024. And Portugal, I think, just added to that, so actually we may be one -- one higher.

Many allies are making investments beyond the monetary aspect of the Wales pledge, answering Secretary General Stoltenberg's call to provide, and I quote here, "cash and capabilities and contributions," unquote. I appreciate the troops and the leadership these nations provide to support NATO's Kosovo, Afghanistan, forward presence and other missions.

With Secretary General Stoltenberg's capable leadership, we also continue to improve the speed of the political decision-making. Coupled to building the NATO's military readiness, speed of alliance consultation and decision-making are a credible deterrent to any who would threaten our democracies.

We engaged, also, our European Union partners on security cooperation. Specifically, we drilled down on military mobility. In our defense cooperation with the E.U., NATO recognizes

effective deterrence and defense depends on a transparent dialogue between us. We must demonstrate the political will among us to advance our security priorities.

We also recognized that uncoordinated investments that waste resources or duplicate alliance efforts undercut our collective deterrence and defense posture, so we found further areas for cooperation and alignment of our two organizations.

In the global fight against ISIS, we will continue to carry out operations necessary to crush the physical caliphate and prevent a resurgence of ISIS-Daesh. We will be unrelenting in our effort. Working with like-minded nations, we will target ISIS around the world, for this remains a global fight.

To support these efforts, NATO is transitioning its current activity in Iraq into a sustainable training mission. In concert with the new Iraqi government, we will capitalize on Iraq's success and reinforce their long-term counterterrorism efforts. We cannot allow ISIS or any other terrorist group to terrorize the people of this region, again driving thousands of refugees from their homes and into Europe and elsewhere.

On our Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, NATO's steadfast commitment and the implementation of our South Asia strategy have renewed stabilization efforts, now including additional significant development funding from India. Recently, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have joined our ranks, bringing our coalition to a combined 41 nations for Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan.

I should also note that Afghan's security forces continue to improve. All six Afghan corps are deployed throughout the country, demonstrating Afghan resolve, while the Afghan government pursues a stable and inclusive political order for its people, with NATO's support.

The level of confidence today is sufficient for President Ghani to announce a temporary cease-fire for the end of Ramadan, offering the Taliban an opportunity to bring to an end this fighting, and providing the world a clear demonstration of his government and our alliance's commitment to peace, and an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process.

In summary, for nearly 70 years, the NATO alliance has served to uphold the values and the principles on which our democracies were founded. The American people remain committed to this alliance, and we look forward to working together to sustain our core function, which is the collective defense of our people, while fostering peace and security.

So thank you. And may I take your questions?

STAFF: So let's just keep our questions short, given the earlier delay. But, Teri?

Q: Hi. Teri Schultz with (inaudible), NPR.

On the cooperation between the E.U. and NATO, you've now gotten your "Four 30s" plan endorsed by -- by all the allies, but without real rapid advances in military mobility, which

requires heavy investment by the E.U., how credible is that plan, that you could actually move 30 battalions quickly across Europe, with military mobility in the state that it is now? Do you trust that the E.U. will move fast enough on its infrastructure upgrades that are needed?

Thanks very much.

SEC. MATTIS: Yeah, we -- we could move our forces across Europe right now, today. You've all seen it done. You've seen certain peacetime constraints on them. Those probably would not exist in the event of a crisis. Obviously, people -- many of these are basically national requirements, custom requirements, that sort of thing.

So we can do it right now. We're talking about setting a process by which we make this the norm, rather than simply a response in a crisis situation.

But the improved readiness of our forces is a real demonstration of political will. Fundamentally, it's a demonstration that we will stand with our fellow nations in the event they're threatened. And yes, it is credible.

STAFF: Bob Burns, AP.

Q: Mr. Secretary, Bob Burns, The Associated Press.

A question for you about President Ghani's cease-fire. Of course, it applies only to the Taliban. I'm wondering what you feel -- is there room to intensify -- how much room is there to intensify the American counterterrorism operations against ISIS-K? And how much of a threat do they still pose, ISIS-K?

SEC. MATTIS: Well, the NATO campaign is in protection of the Afghan people as we move toward a -- a political solution. So you have, on the one hand, this very bold statement by President Ghani, reinforced by the Afghan security forces, that we're now in a position to continue the process that he started, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned back in February, where he offered an open door to the Taliban.

Their response was, of course, to kick off their fighting season in the months following. They have not made progress and we're in a strong position. We support completely what he's doing. And obviously, those forces that would have been otherwise engaging the Taliban, so long as the Taliban followed the offer of cease-fire -- those forces are now in a stronger position to focus elsewhere. So there's a fair amount of capability, then, that would be available.

But we'll have to see how this turns out. This is -- this is going forward with all the challenges, going forward on a peace process in the midst of a war like this bring.

So we'll see how it works out, and we'll keep you posted.

Q: So you were saying that there were more resources available to go against ISIS-K? Is that what you're saying?

SEC. MATTIS: Absolutely, there are.

Just for example, should the Taliban take full advantage of the cease-fire in the best interest of the Afghan people, then many of the surveillance assets we have overhead could be reoriented to ISIS-K, to al-Qaida, and other foreign terrorists who have no business being in Afghanistan in the first place.

Thank you.

STAFF: Mustafa Sarwar

Q: Secretary Mattis, thank you very much. I'm Mustafa Sarwar from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

You know that one of the major objectives of President Trump's South Asia Strategy was to weaken the Taliban in Afghanistan, but some in Afghanistan argue that the strategy has not been able to turn the tide against the Taliban, as they have stepped up their attacks across the country.

Are you in agreement? And what's your assessment of this strategy now?

Thank you.

SEC. MATTIS: I -- I think that one of the ways that you can determine the efficacy of the strategy is that we have had other nations join, we have had other nations increase the number of troops that they are committing, we have had other nations contribute significant amounts of development funds. So what you're seeing are objective indicators of a subjective analysis that the strategy is on the right track by numerous other nations, there in the region, but even more so from Europe to elsewhere out in the Pacific.

So this is not a narrow view of that; it's actually improving further.

You noted, and I know what you're -- you're driving at: You said they have kept up their attacks. In fact, they have been unable to keep up their attacks.

The number of enemy-initiated attacks are down, which means more of the attacks are now initiated by the Afghan and NATO forces. That in itself is an indicator of the initiative is shifting to those who are initiating the attacks.

Further, the actual number of attacks this year are down from past years.

The -- the real challenge that -- that you face in your job of trying to understand this, and I face in my job, as well, is similar, and that is how do you equate progress and violence going on at the same time?

And it -- it is a very challenging intellectual effort to try to get your hands around it. You have to look at who initiates the attacks. Sometimes violence can actually indicate you're getting closer to peace; we've all seen that at the end of other conflicts.

But at the same time, I think the strategy stands up to any kind of scrutiny as going in the right direction. And that's indicated by events there on the battlefield, and more broadly and right into the halls of Brussels here in the -- where we've met.

Thank you.

STAFF: Sylvie, AFP.

Q: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I have a question about Syria: How long are you ready to stay in Syria, given the fact that Assad said several times that he wants to control the whole country and that you could end up fighting the Syrian regime?

SEC. MATTIS: Yeah, we are in Syria based on the conditions that are being set.

As you know, a little over 100 hours ago, our partner forces kicked off in an offensive against one of the last remaining enclaves of the physical caliphate. So we are still engaged, ladies and gentlemen, in a fight against the -- the ISIS-Daesh caliphate. It is not over yet and that continues. So obviously we are going to continue the U.N. mandate, being that Daesh is -- is a threat, then we are going to continue to go after them.

Further, we are not simply going to think, "Well, they're gone, so let's just walk away now." What you've got to do is support the local governing councils, you've got to support local security, so you don't walk out and have them walk right back in. I mean, this only makes common sense. This is not a -- a radically new thought.

At the same time, the diplomats are working, under Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations special envoy on Syria. They are working to re-energize the Geneva process, which is the way we're going to try to end this tragedy that's been going on ever since Assad declared war on his own people.

So all of these factors have to be considered when you look at how long we will be there.

Q: (Inaudible) this Syrian regime?

SEC. MATTIS: That -- we -- we are there for -- under one circumstance right now and that is to fight ISIS. We've made that very, very clear.

STAFF: Thank you. Thank you all very, very much.

SEC. MATTIS: Let me just ask one quickly. This young lady came all the way from Iraq and I met her earlier.

Go ahead, please.

Q: Thank you. Yes, yes, thank you very much.

My question: If the U.S. Congress imposes sanctions on few Iraq militia groups belonging to Hashed al-Shaabi, one of them is Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which won 15 seat in the Iraqi parliament in the last month's election. Now how the U.S. will deal with this group in Iraq? How?

Thank you very much.

SEC. MATTIS: Ladies and gentlemen, in the -- in the election, can you imagine 2014, with what was going on -- as Daesh, as ISIS was toppling cities in Iraq and taking over large parts of Iraq, could you imagine those times that we would be now discussing the outcome of an election in Iraq?

And the Iraqi army has now removed the last of the physical caliphate there, with great help from the coalition. And they were able to hold that election that came up. And all of us were watching it, because we didn't know how it was going to turn out.

Welcome to democracy. Perfect, imperfect, however you want to call it, welcome to a democracy in action.

We will deal with what -- the will of the Iraq people. We will deal with those who come into the new government as it forms. And we will deal with them as a sovereign nation. And other nations, if they're not there at the invitation of the Iraqi people, the Iraqi government, they need to leave.

We would only be there -- we the NATO mission -- would only be there if invited by the Iraqi government.

So we'll have to give them some time to form the government. And then we will be able to -- we'll be able to determine our way ahead as an alliance.

And I really have to go to a meeting now. I'd love to take a question from the Afghan press too, but I've got to go to a meeting now.

Thanks very much, ladies and gentlemen.

STAFF: Thank you all very much.

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